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MAHAMAGHAM

(An Album and a Guide Book)

EDITED & PUBLISHED

BY

M. K. RANGASWAMI AIYANGAR
MYLAPORE, MADRAS

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PREFACE

Religion has played a great part in the life of the people of our country and hence all forms of art have been mostly dedicated to Divine worship. The greatest treasures of our land are to be found in and around our temples and Viharas and the best of our Poetry and the grandest of our Epics have all a religious setting. The sculptures and paintings most often refer to certain events and incidents of the Hindu Puranas or the Buddhistic legends.

It is a matter of very great regret that some of the best of our old sculptures and paintings now adorn the museums of the West while those that are left in the country, often bear the mark of the destructive hand of the foreign invaders. Not even a few of the hundreds of the sculptures in the ruins of Vijayanagar are found intact and one of the Asoka Pillars was converted into a road-roller by a European Engineer.

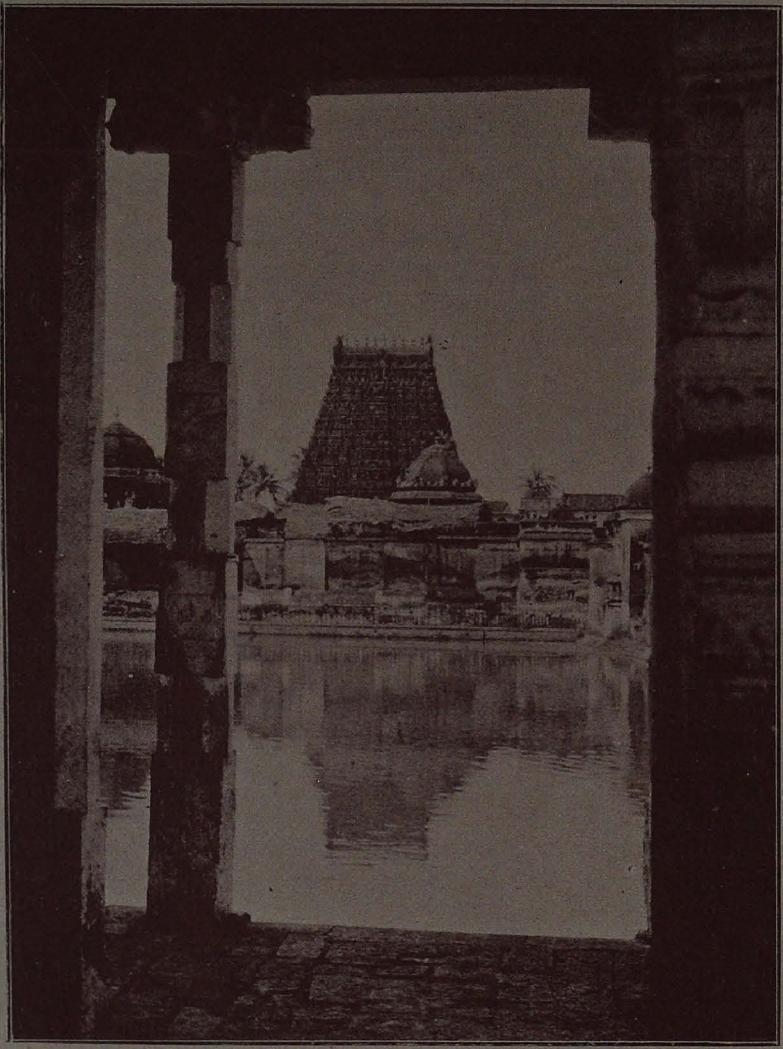
While the vandalism of the soldiers raging with martial success may be understood, if not excused, it is difficult to condone the utter neglect and decay to which the art treasures are mercilessly exposed to in our temples today. The Pudumandapam of Madura containing very delicately carved sculptures is converted into a medley of shops and a row of beautiful Equestrian statues at Tirupathi have all been closed by brick walls and made into an ugly room. It is a pity that those in charge of temples have no artistic taste and do not realise their responsiblity in the preservation of the priceless monuments in their charge. It must be admitted that this is all due to an utter lack of appreciation, much less understanding, of art in our country.

The present system of education fails to create any taste for art or architecture and it is my humble aim to publish a series of booklets with the object of making the layman and the student take a greater interest in the art and the history of our land. Realising my limitations fully well, I appeal to those who are better qualified, to co-operate with me and make my work a success.

No apology is needed for my taking advantage of the Mahamagham month for commencing this work and being the first of a series, the opinion and the suggestions of the readers are sincerely solicited.

Chithrakulam
Mylapore
27—2—1933

M. K. RANGASWAMI AIYANGAR.



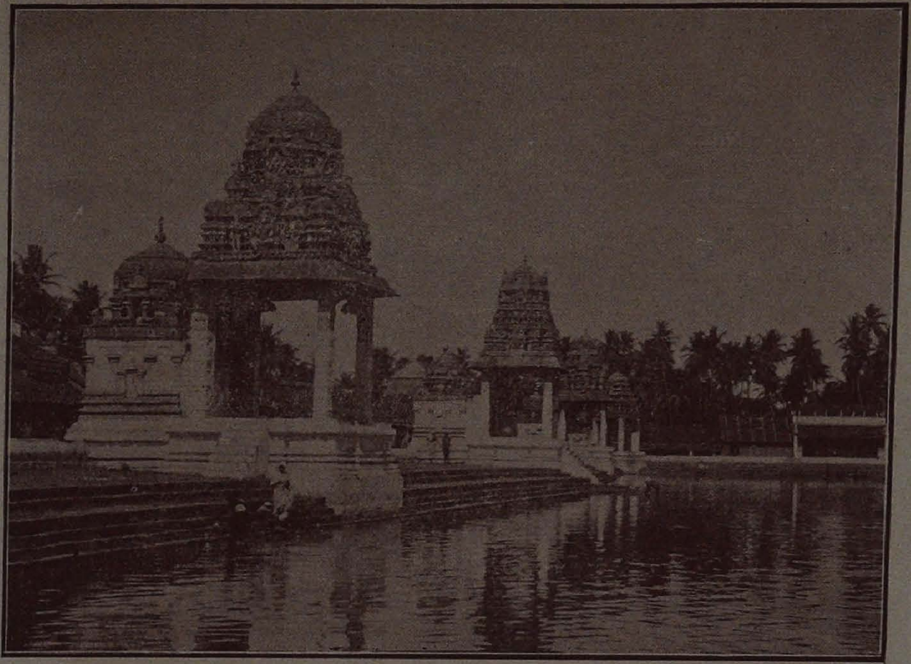
Kumbeswaraswami Temple M. K. R.

THIS BOOK

IS DEDICATED

TO

All lovers of Art and Religion, Europeans and Indians alike whose selfless work has opened our eyes to the greatness of our past.



Mahamakham Tank M. K. R.

MAHAMAGHAM

BATH—10-3-'33

South India is pre-eminently a land of Shrines and festivals and it abounds in most imposing temples with a galaxy of towers and tanks and several Religious fairs and festivals celebrated at all times of the year. The grandest of these is the Mahamagham festival which will be celebrated early in March next at Kumbakonam, the very centre of South Indian Culture.

Mahamagham (lit. the great Magham) is mainly a bathing festival celebrated but once in twelve years when Jupiter passes the constellation of Leo on the full moon day of the month of Masi (*i.e.*) Magham. Unlike the Kumba Mela of North India and the Pushkaram of Andhra Desa where a sacred river is the scene of the festivity, it is a holy tank at Kumbakonam that draws several lakhs of pilgrims from all parts of the country.

Another View of the Mahamagham Tank M. K. R.

THE LEGEND OF THE HOLY KUMBA

The extraordinary sanctity attached to the tank on the Mahamagham day and its tremendous Religious significances are explained in the history of the shrines of Kumbakonam (Sthalamahathmyam) and is of very great interest, referring as it does, to the cosmic destruction of the Universe and the process of its re-creation in which Brahma and Siva play a great part. According to Hindu Shastras, at the end of every four Yugas, there occurs a complete cosmic destruction. On the eve of such a one, Brahma was much worried over the problem of protecting the Vedas, Shastras and the cosmic seed (Srishti-Bheeja). He therefore approached Mahavishnu for advice. The Lord instructed him to knead the clay obtained from various sacred places with the holy nectar, prepare a pot out of the same, and secure in it the Vedas, Shastras, etc., together with the cosmic seed. He directed, that this was to be placed on the southern side of the Mount Meru. When the cosmic destruction followed, the Sun and the Moon lost their lights and a devastating deluge followed with a terrible wind. The Holy 'Kalasa' (pot) was drifted from place to place and finally

Kasi Viswanathaswami Temple M. K. R.

settled at a particular spot. Lord Siva then took the form of a hunter and broke the pot with an arrow. The nectar contained in it scattered all round and gave rise to the two holy tanks of Kumbakonam and a number of sacred places near it. Then Lord Siva made a Lingha out of the broken pot and disappeared in it. Later, Brahma, managed to create the world again.

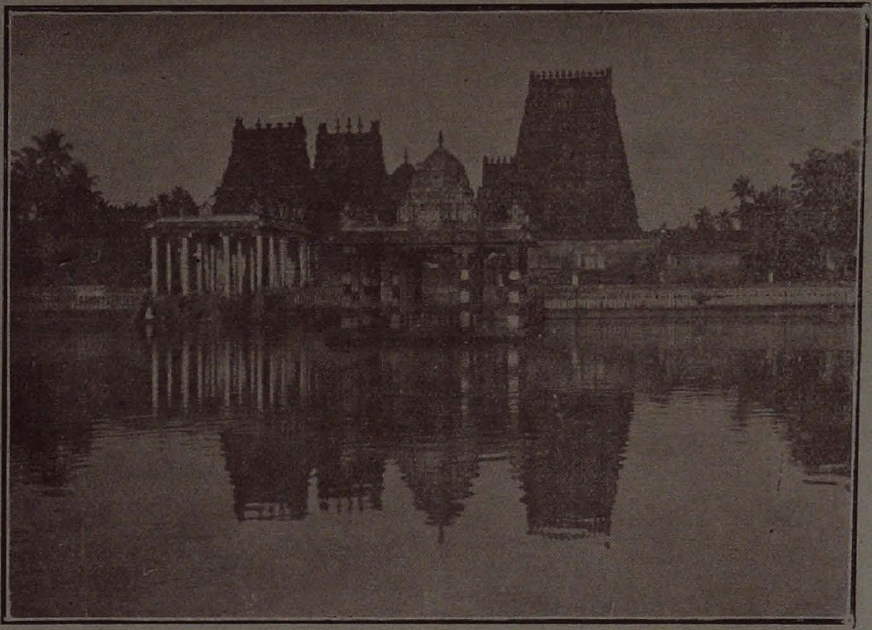
THE TRADITION OF THE NINE RIVERS

There is another tradition that also explains the holiness of the Mahamagham Tank. In this vast country, nine rivers (Nava Kanyaka) are considered to be specially sacred and these are the Ganges, the Yamuna, the Narbada, the Sarasvathi, the Godavari, the Cauvery, the Kanya, the Payoshni and the Sarayoo. Once upon a time, these rivers begged Siva to suggest a method by which they could rid themselves of the sins transmitted to them by countless pilgrims bathing in them. They were then directed to have a dip in the Mahamagham Tank on the holy occasion. Therefore the presiding deities of these rivers are supposed to enter the Mahamagham Tank to get their

Thulabhara Mandapam M. K. R.

impurities purged out and these deities are represented by nine wells in the bed of the Tank. No wonder then, that the Tank is considered to be specially holy on the occasion and is believed to give salvation to those who bathe in it with sincere faith and true repentance.

The Tank itself is one of the prettiest to be seen in all South India. It has well-set steps on all sides and the banks are studded with a series of turrets and Vimanams, containing each a Linga. There are also a number of small temples facing the tank and these present a particularly gay appearance on the festival days. Govinda Dikshit, a Prime Minister of the Nayak Kings, Achutha Nayak and Raghunath, effected repairs to this holy tank and also built the Pushya Mandapam in the river. *Ayyantheru* and *Ayyankulam* were named after him. It appeared that even ruling monarchs of olden days visited Kumbakonam to participate in this grand festival. There is an inscription at Nagalapuram recording the visit of the great Krishna Devaraya to this place in connection with the Mahamagham Festival. His successor, King Achutharaya, performed several gifts including *Thulapurusha Dana* in which the King weighs himself

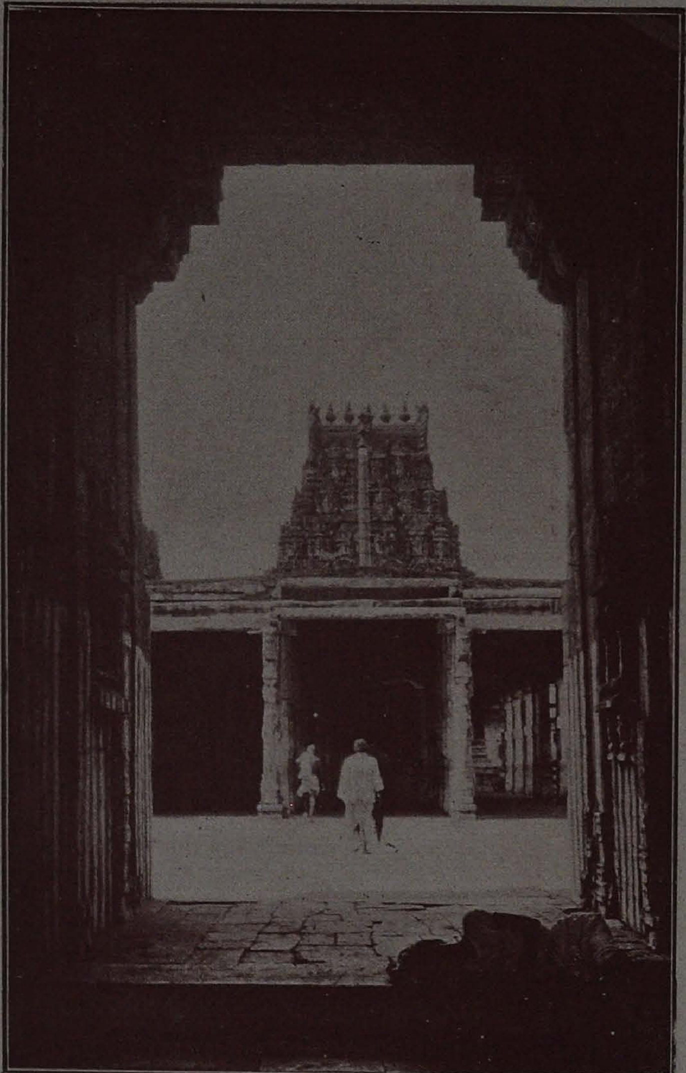


Sarangapaniswami Temple
(with Potramarai Tank in the foreground) M. K. R.

against gold and precious stones and then distributes them to pious and learned Brahmins. A beautiful carving representing this is found on the ceiling of the Sixteen pillar mandapam on the bank of the tank.

THE POTRAMARAI TANK

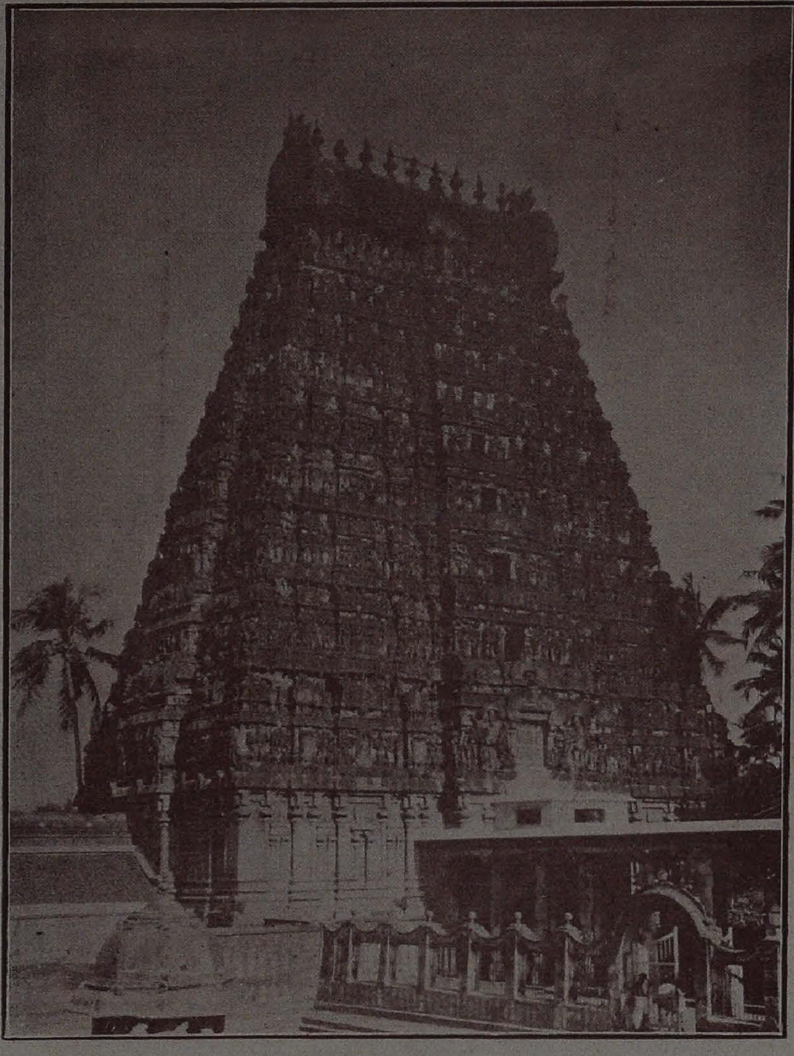
The other tank stated to have been formed at the time of the creation is the *Potramari* between the temples of Sri Sarangapani and Kumbeswaraswami. Hemarishi performed a penance on its banks and hence it is also called Hemarishi Pushkarani. It appears that this tank was bigger and extended right up to the Kumbeswaraswami temple. Later a part of it was closed to form a road linking the Bazaar Street with the Ramaswami Temple. It is a matter of great regret that this holy tank is kept in a very dirty condition, but in any case, it adds considerably to the beauty of the two temples on either side reflecting their towers, mandapams, and temple walls in its moss-covered green waters.



The gateway Sarangapaniswami Temple M. K. R.

KUMBAKONAM

Kumbakonam is one of the most ancient towns of South India and it has been referred to *Kuda Mukku* in ancient Saivite works and *Kudanthai* or *Thirukudanthai* in Vaishnavite literature. The latter name is still in vogue, with the Orthodox Vaishnavites.



Kumbheswaraswami Temple (main tower) M. K. R.

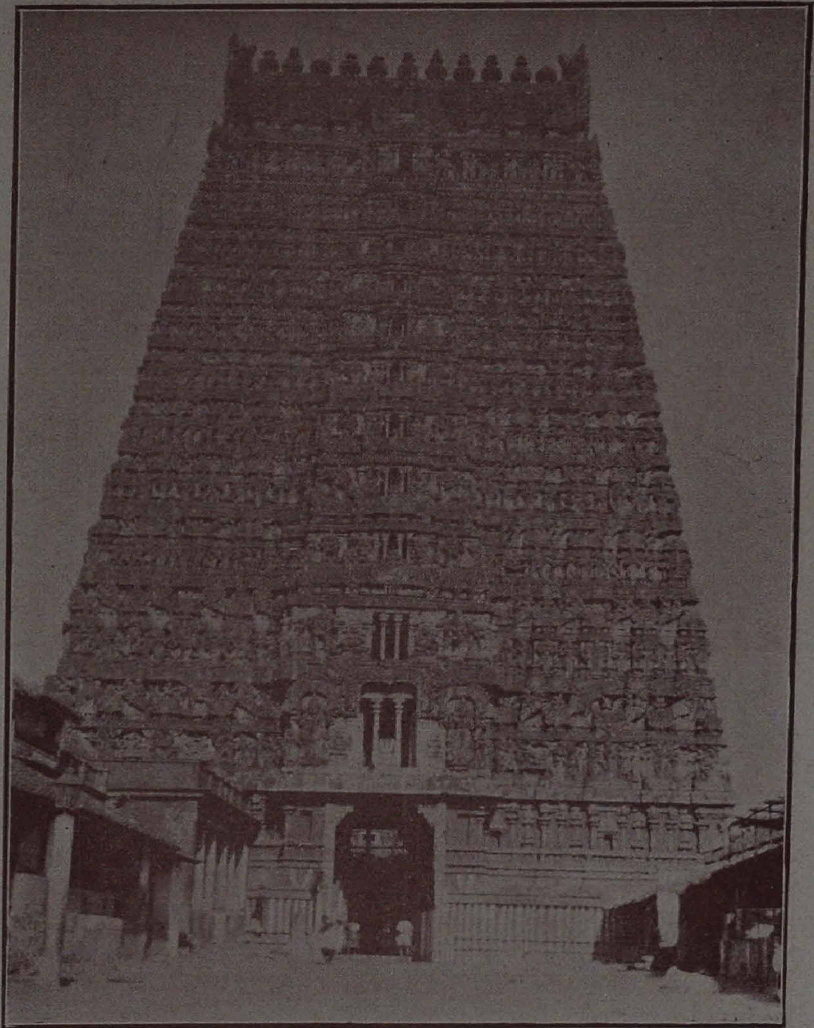
Gaya in Northern India where all pious Hindus perform Shradhas, is particularly sacred owing to the Eighteen Devathas worshipped there. The Eighteen shrines near Kumbakonam represent the same Devathas and the Holy Cauvery vies with her sister Ganges in offering salvation to the devout pilgrims who bathe in it before worshipping the deities in the temples.

Kumbheswaraswami Temple
(front view with Potramarai Tank in the foreground) M. K. R.

Kumbakonam may rightly be called a town of temples as these are scattered almost in all its streets and corners. Some of the shrines contain most interesting sculptures as well as valuable inscriptions. Prominent are those dedicated to Sarangapaniswami, Kumbeswaraswami, Ramaswami, Nageswaraswami and Chakrapaniswami.

KUMBESWARASWAMI TEMPLE

It has been previously stated that Lord Siva who came in the form of a hunter to break the holy Kumba (pot) at the beginning of the creation, disappeared in the Linga which he made, hence the names Kumbeswara and Kumbalingam, As the Linga in the temple is supposed to have been made out of the broken bits of the Kalasa or the Kumba it is covered with a Kavacha (metal cover) when the Abishekam is performed. Mangalambika is the name of the Goddess in this temple. There are also smaller shrines dedicated to Kirathamurthi representing Siva in the form of a hunter and Lakshminarayana. The temple is the largest in the town and contains a

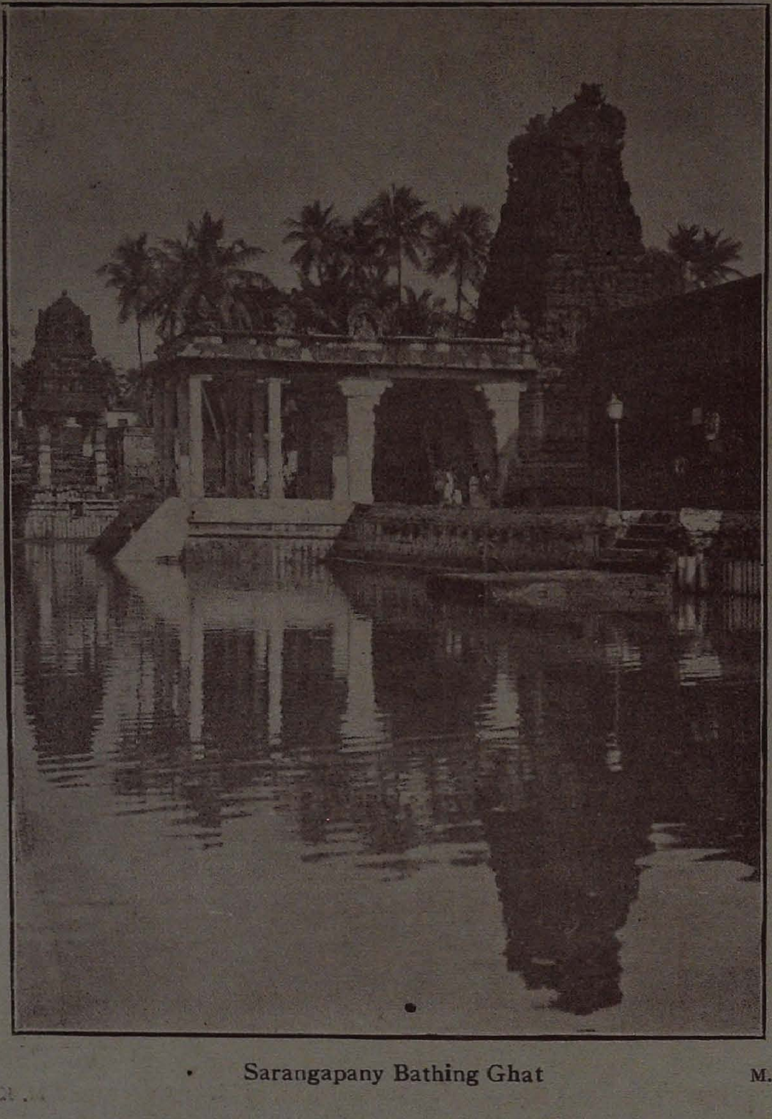


The Tower of Sri Sarangapani Swami Temple M. K. R.

colonnade in front known as the dancing hall or Natana Mandapa over 300 feet in length and leading to the main tower.

SRI SARANGAPANISWAMI TEMPLE

Reference has been previously made to Hemarishi. He was no other than the well-known Brigu Maharishi, who once had the auda-



Sarangapany Bathing Ghat M. K. R.

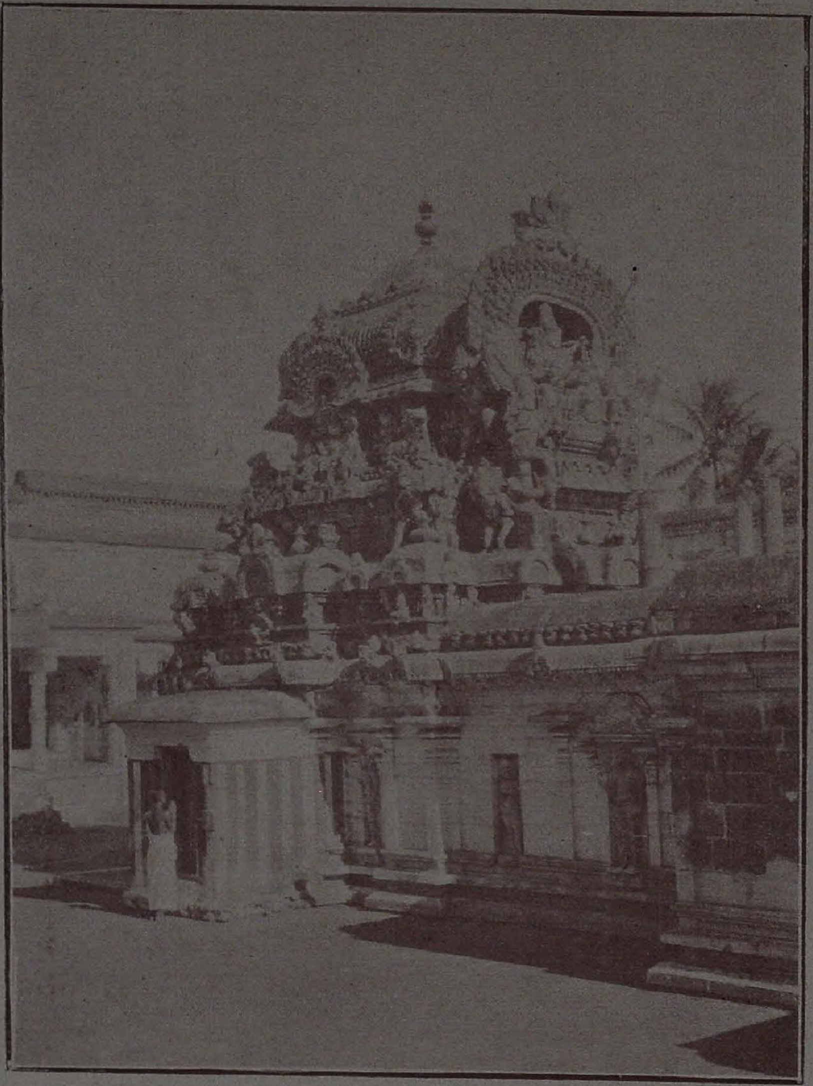
city to kick the Lord of the Vaikunta and later repented for the same and performed a severe penance on the bank of the Potramarai Tank. Lakshmi incarnated as the daughter of the Sage and Lord Vishnu came down from his Celestial abode in his chariot to marry her. Hence the Garbagraham of this temple is in the form of a chariot and the idol is represented with *Sarangam* the name of Vishnu's bow. The name of the Goddess is *Komalavalli*. A small

Front view of Nageswaraswami Temple M. K. R.

shrine on the north bank of the tank is dedicated to Hemarishi. The front tower of the temple is the tallest in the town measuring over 150 ft. The shrine has been sung by as many as six Alwars.

SRI NAGESWARASWAMI TEMPLE

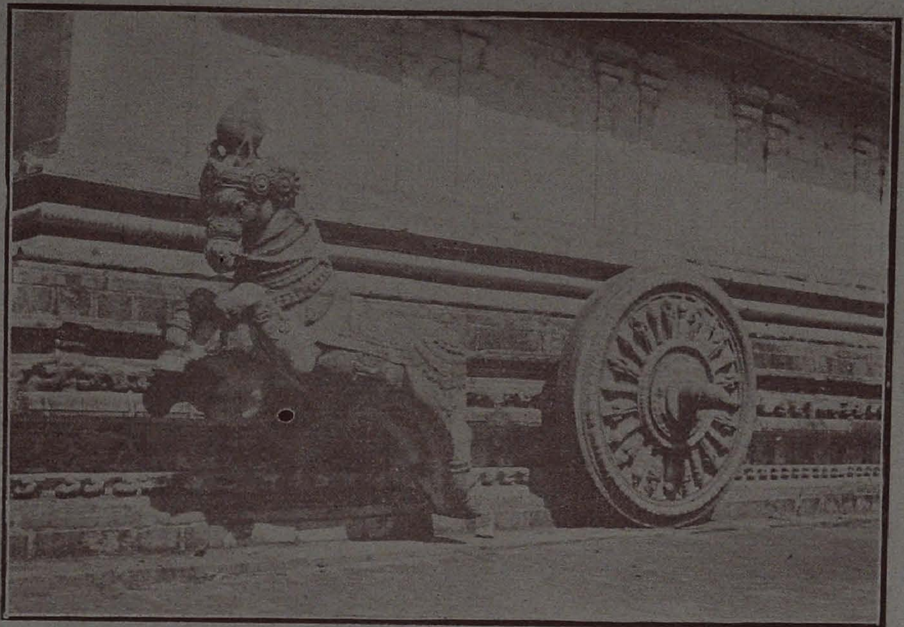
There is an old Legend referring to the Sun-God (*i.e.*) *Surya* who lost his light and regained it after offering worship to Nageswaraswami here. The temple is so constructed that the rays of the morning Sun fall upon the Lingam on three days in the year, and it contains a shrine dedicated to *Surya*, the Sun God. The temple also contains small shrines of Ganesa and Nataraja. The latter is fashioned like a mandapam but contains a lithic statue of a horse and chariot wheel. This temple is particularly picturesque and contains the sculptures on the wall of the Garbagraham indicating Buddhistic influence and culture.



The Garbagraha of Nageswaraswami Temple M. K. R.

SRI RAMASWAMI TEMPLE

Raghunatha Naick, one of the Kings of Tanjore, discovered a beautiful set of idols of Sri Rama and Sita when a Tank was dug at Darasuram, and conceived the idea of building a temple. The Ramaswami Temple on the Southern end of the Bazaar Street was constructed and contains very delicately carved sculptures representing incidents



The Nataraja Mandapa (of Nageswaraswami Temple) M. K. R.

from Ramayana. One of the pillars bears the sculpture of the King himself. Ordinarily Sri Rama is depicted in the standing posture, with Kothandam in his hand and Seetha and Lakshmana on either side but in this temple the Idols appear in the usual Coronation grouping, Rama and Sita seated, in the midst of Bharata, Lakshmana, Sathrughna and Hanuman.

SRI CHAKRAPANI SWAMI TEMPLE

At the other end of the Bazaar Street, on a slightly elevated spot is the Chakrapani Temple. The great weapon of Lord Vishnu is the Chakra, called also *Sudharsana*. The hexagonal representation of Sri Chakrapani is particularly interesting. There is a sub-shrine in the temple to the Sun God. Legend has it that the Sun once became very arrogant and gave a lot of trouble to the Devas.. Whereupon Mahavishnu in the form of Sri Chakrapani the deity of this temple subdued him. The ten days of Brahmothsavam in the month of Magha (Masi) is supposed to be clebrated by the Sun God himself. Besides the above, there are several temples in the town including one in which Brahma is the presiding deity.

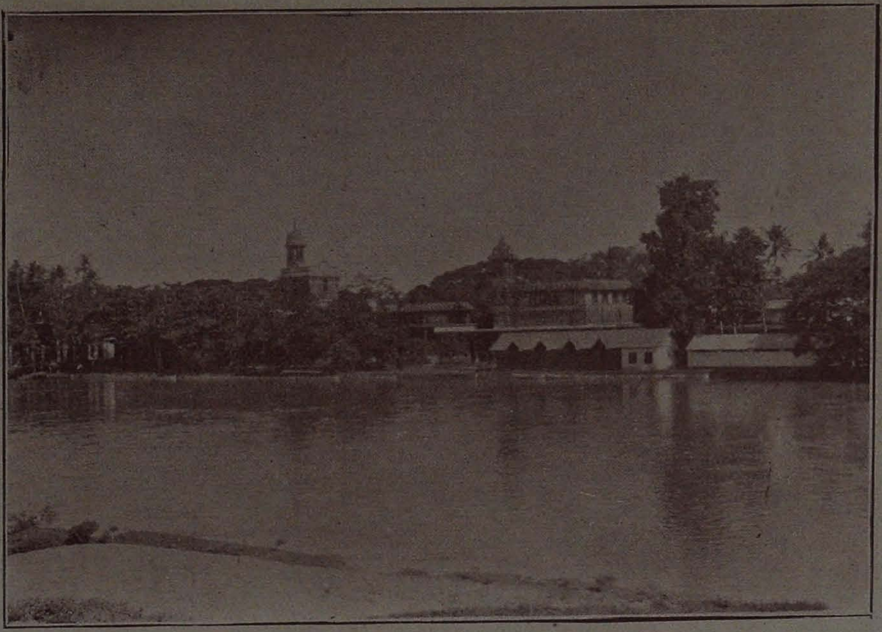
The front quadrangle, Nageswaraswami Temple M. K. R.

The name Bhaskara Kshetram is generally given to a place containing shrines dedicated to all the three deities Brahma, Vishnu and Siva worshipped by the Sun, and Kumbakonam is one of the few such kshetrams in the country.

Besides the innumerable temples in the town itself, there are several places within a radius of a few miles from Kumbakonam and some of them contain very ancient and picturesque temples. Prominent among these are Thiruvidamarudur, Thirunageswaram, Darasuram, Thirubuvanam and Swamimalai. All these places are well-worth a visit.

THE CHOLA COUNTRY

Having been the seat of successive Chola Kings and containing a treasure of interesting sculptures and inscriptions, Kumbakonam is of equal interest to students of History and Archæology. It has maintained its high traditions and has been the centre of South Indian Culture having produced some of the best exponents of Art and Music as well as Philosophy and literature. The Government College



The Government College, Kumbakonam (with the Cauvery in the foreground) M. K. R.

on the bank of the Cauvery early gained the name of the Cambridge of South India and claims a large number of best Educationists and Mathematicians as well as Lawyers and Statesmen.

For many centuries it has also been a seat of religious learning and to-day it contains a larger number of Brahmins well versed in Vedas than any other place in India. It is a thrilling sight to see hundreds of these persons, decked with religious marks, flowers and sandal-paste pass through the streets singing the Vedas on festival occasions.

The town and its neighbourhood has attracted many Religious Heads. The Sankara Mutt of Conjeevaram moved to Tanjore at the request of PratapSingh, King of Tanjore, when there was some trouble on account of the skirmishes that were taking place between the Mahomadans and the British in the early part of the eighteenth century. But Kumbakonam with its sacred Cauvery by its side and the surrounding shrines drew the mutt to it sometime later. The Ahobila Mutt, the religious head of a large section of the Vaishnavites,

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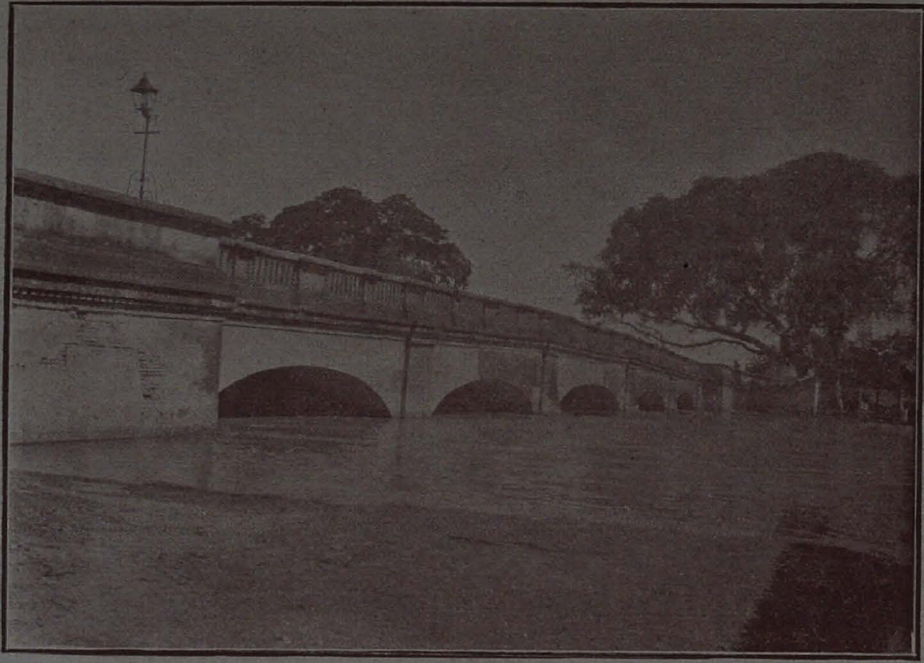
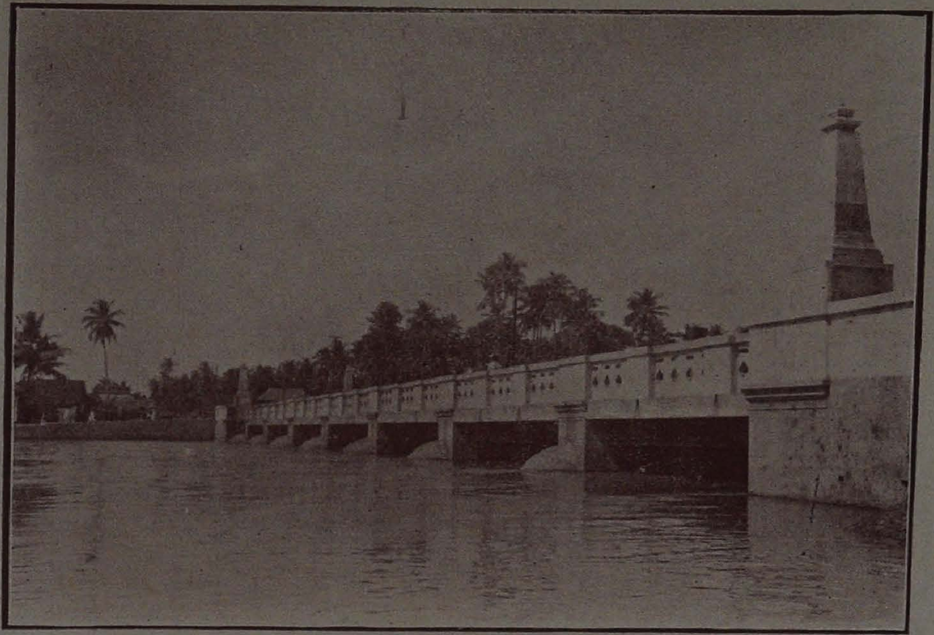


The Old Bridge on the Cauvery M. K. R.

has its headquarters nearby. The wealthy and well-known Pandara Sannadhis of Thiruvaduthurai, Thirupanandal and Dharmapuram Mutts are all in the neighbourhood.

Besides the Cauvery passing North of the town, Arasalar, one of its branches, runs on the other side adding to the convenience of the town. But on account of the low level of the place and close vegetation, its mosquitos have a reputation equalled by those only at Srirangam, and visitors will do well to provide themselves with mosquito-curtains to ensure their nights' rest as well as to avoid filarial contagion. The Health Department do their best to make the place safe for visitors and to render them all possible convenience.

Protected drinking water will be supplied in all the pilgrim sheds by the Municipal authorities who also supply freshly prepared packets of food. Extra Police arrangements will be made with a central lost-property office and lost-children's office near Potramarai. The Mahamakham fair and Exhibition as well as the All-India Swadeshi Exhibition have already been opened and are well worth a visit. Numerous



The Gandhi-Irwin Bridge Over the Cauvery M. K. R.

special trains will be run to Kumbakonam and special platforms and Booking Offices have been erected for the convenience of passengers.

THIRUVIDAMARUDUR

Within five miles from Kumbakonam and on the bank of the Cauvery is Thiruvidamarudur known as *Madyarjunam*. There is a tradition that one of the Chola Kings who accidentally killed a Brahmin was caught by a ghost (Brahmahatthi). He finally got rid of it by visiting the Sanctum of this temple, leaving the ghost at the gate. One of the inner Gopurams on the East contains a sculpture of the ghost. The presiding deity is called *Mahalinga* and the name of the Goddess is Brihatkuchamba.

THIRUNAGESWARAM

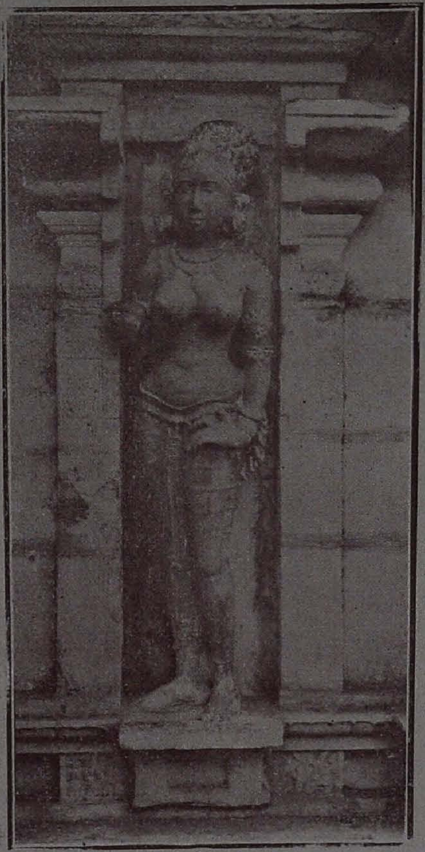
As the name indicates, the Lord in the temple of Thirunageswaram is said to have been worshipped by the Kings of serpents (Nagaraja), and the locality is identified with Champakaranya. Sekkilar, the

The Car Festival, Thiruvidamarudur M. K. R.

great author of Periapuranam, was a resident of this place. He was the Minister of Kulothunga Chola the Second and his statue is found in the temple.

UPPILIAPPANKOIL

Not far from Thirunageswaram is the Uppiliappankoil, a small but ancient shrine sung by the Alwars. Its classic name is Thiruvin-



Statue of a Lady M. K. R.

nagar and it now serves as the Thirupathi for the Chola country. There is a legend that explains the preparation of the holy prasadams without salt in this temple and justifies the common name. But the correct name seems to be "Oppiliappan" meaning the Lord without an equal.

PATTISWARAM

Once upon a time Goddess Parvathi performed a penance with a view to become part of Siva's body and Pattiswaram is identified with this locality. There is an idol representing Parvathi embracing a Linga near this place. There are also references to other sacred shrines in the inscription of the temple.

Govinda Dikshit, the minister of the Nayak King to whom reference has already been made, resided in this place and made several

The front view of the Thribuvanam Temple M. K. R.

gifts to the Siva temple. There are stone images of the Minister and his wife in the mandapam attached to the temple.

SWAMIMALAI

The temples of Subramania like those of Srinivasa are mostly constructed on hillocks or elevated places. Adhering to this principle an artificial mount on the bank of the Cauvery forms the seat of the shrine of Swamimalai, three miles to the west of Kumbakonam. Here it was that the son Subrahmanya became the Guru of the father Siva and saved him from trouble. He is called here Saminathan.

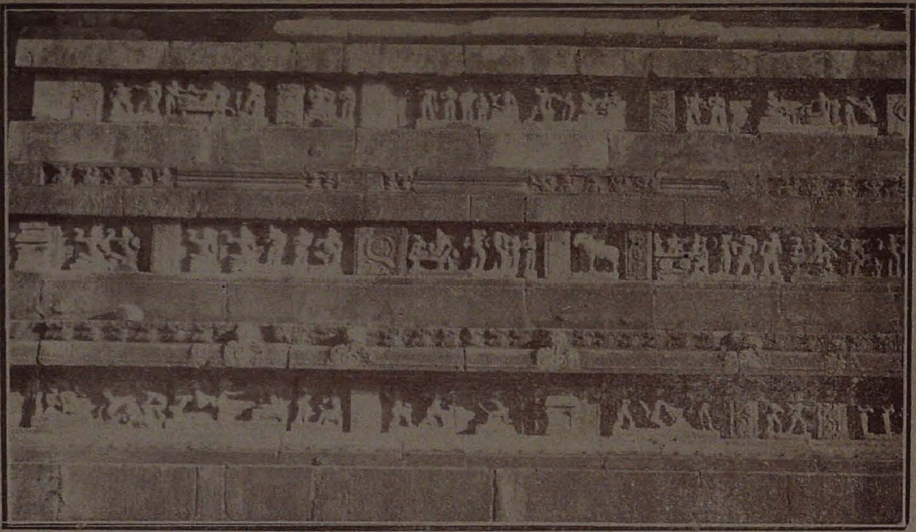
THRIBUVANAM

The Brihatheeswaraswami Temple at Tanjore is a unique piece of architecture. Its grandeur was so much appreciated by the later Chola Kings that each constructed one on the same plan. Ordinarily, the tower at the entrance of temples are very tall while the Vimanam over the Sanctum is comparatively smaller in structure, but this is

The Vimana over the Sanctum, Thribuvanam M. K. R.

reversed in the case of the Tanjore temple, and this plan is followed in the temples of Gangaikonda Cholapuram, Thribuvanam and Darasuram.

The God in the Sanctum of Thribuvanam is named Kampahareswara as he removed the shivering of a Chola King. One of the inscriptions here narrates the victory of Kulothunga Chola and the temples constructed by him.



Relief on the Wall of the Temple M. K. R.

The sculptures in this temple are of a very high order and some of them represent scenes from the Ramayana.

DARASURAM

From an architectural point of view the temple of Darasuram is particularly interesting. The stone records in it refer to the place by the name of Raja Rajapuram. On the three sides of the Garbagraha are seen reliefs depicting scenes from Siva Puranas. There is also a shrine to Yama in the temple.

NATHANKOIL

Situated a few miles south of Kumbakonam the temple in this place represents Mahavishnu blessing Nandikeswara who invoked him by penance.

Nathankoil was called Nandipuram during the time of the Pallavas when it was the seat of their Government for the southern tracts. It was then a fortified town and the Pallava King Nandivarman, was released from this place. Thirumangai Alwar has referred to this shrine as Nandipura-Vinnagaram.

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